



Commentary Shaul Shay

Hezbollah at a crossroad

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TEN YEARS after the Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Lebanese Shi'ite militia, is at a crossroad.

In the fifth year of the civil war in Syria, which it is fighting on the side of the Assad regime, it is at the peak of its military power; but it is isolated politically and there are significant question marks over the implications of the emerging new order in Syria for its status and resiliency.

The Second Lebanon War, which Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah described as a "divine victory," led in practice to 10 of the quietest years on the Israel-Lebanese border. This was partly a result of the deterrent balance Israel was able to impose through the 2006 war. But there were other contributing factors: Local developments in Lebanon itself and major regional events in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon kept Hezbollah from seeking confrontation with Israel in the Lebanese theater.

Hezbollah learned a great deal from the 2006 war and significantly upgraded its military capabilities in its wake. It now has around 45,000 fighters, 21,000 of them in regular service. It has turned most of the Shi'ite villages in southern Lebanon into fortified military outposts both above and below ground.

It has acquired highly accurate long-range missiles with larger warheads than it had in 2006. It now has over 100,000 missiles and rockets (compared to around 12,000 in 2006). It has also expanded and im-

proved its capabilities in unmanned drones, anti-aircraft defenses, shore-to-sea missiles, anti-tank weapons, intelligence gathering, as well as command and control systems.

Moreover, during its extended fighting in Syria, it has gained rich battle experience, including the operation of battalion size forces in ground attacks. It is likely that in any future war with Israel, it will try to use these capabilities to launch simultaneous attacks on several border villages and military positions at the very outset of the fighting.

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Hezbollah has also been active on the Golan Front in an effort to build a terrorist infrastructure against Israel. It is doing so in cooperation with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and with Assad's approval.

Bottom line: Hezbollah's military capabilities today are more like those of a full-fledged national army than a terrorist organization.

However, Hezbollah is deeply embroiled

in the confrontation in Syria. At any given time, it has around 5,000 fighters in the field – almost a quarter of its standing army. In the years of fighting in Syria, it suffered heavy losses, estimated at around 1,300 dead and more than 5,000 wounded.

The fighting in Syria is also taking a heavy financial toll. Most of this used to be covered by Hezbollah's patrons in Tehran. Recently, however, Iran's economic woes led to a significant reduction in its aid to Hezbollah. As a result, the organization had to cut back on routine activities inside Lebanon.

Moreover, its enemies in Lebanon argue that its involvement in the Syrian war has brought the ISIS threat to Lebanon's doorstep. They point to suicide bombings in Beirut, fighting along the Syria-Lebanon border and the influx of more than a million Syrian refugees who threaten Lebanon's delicate demographic and political fabric.

The bitter fighting and heavy losses caused a significant erosion in Lebanese public opinion. Hezbollah has been roundly criticized at home for sending young Shi'ites to their deaths in Syria just to save the Assad regime.

Nasrallah finds it increasingly difficult to present Hezbollah as the defender of Lebanon against would-be Israeli depredations. He keeps having to make the questionable argument that the campaign in Syria is essential to protect Lebanon against al-Qaeda and ISIS.



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Hezbollah's involvement in the fighting in Syria, Iraq and Yemen alongside its Iranian patron has also made an enemy of Saudi Arabia and its allies. Indeed, the Saudis recently canceled billions of dollars of aid to Lebanon for fear the money might find its way to Hezbollah.

The Saudis are, in fact, spearheading a campaign of delegitimization against Hezbollah. It was in this context that in early March the Gulf States declared Hezbollah a "terrorist organization." Saudi Arabia and Egypt both block television stations identified with Hezbollah on their satellite services, further undermining its PR and propaganda.

The Russian intervention in the fighting in Syria turned the tide in favor of the coalition backing Assad. On the face of it, this appeared to help Hezbollah, putting it on what seemed to be the winning side. But on a deeper strategic level, Russia and the US seem to be drawing closer on a framework for resolving the Syria crisis. And this could pose a significant threat to Hezbollah's interests.

Any political settlement in Syria – with the exception of the highly unlikely continuation of unmitigated Assad rule – will lead to the establishment of a regime in which Syrian forces hostile to Hezbollah participate. This will almost certainly hurt its interests. It is too early to say just how much.

On the face of it, the likelihood of Hezbollah initiating a full-scale confrontation

against Israel while the war in Syria continues to rage seems remote – both because of the ongoing regional turmoil in which it is so deeply involved and because of Israel's deterrence.

But we can point to at least two scenarios in which war between Israel and Hezbollah could erupt.

- An incident on the border with Syria or Lebanon could escalate even to war.
- A political solution in Syria, which allows Hezbollah fighters to return to Lebanon but compromises its status there. In such a situation, Hezbollah might initiate fighting against Israel to reestablish its local standing.

Despite the low probability of war erupting this year, Israel must be ready to meet the challenges posed by Hezbollah at any time, both because of the high degree of danger to the civilian population and to essential infrastructures, and especially in light of Nasrallah's explicit warning that in the next war there will be no red lines.

Given Hezbollah's huge arsenal of missiles and rockets, including precision guided missiles with large warheads, it is important to prepare the civilian population in Israel for a future war which will probably be very different in scope from all previous encounters, especially with regard to civilian casualties and the home front in general.

The threat to the towns and villages on the

northern border from both ground assault and intensive rocket and missile fire may necessitate temporary evacuation of some of the civilian population. Israel will also have to find a way to defend its natural gas rigs in the Mediterranean against a variety of Hezbollah threats.

If war does break out, Israel will aim to keep it as short as possible and thereby reduce the potential damage. The huge advances since the 2006 war in anti-rocket and anti-missile systems – led by Iron Dome and Magic Wand – will afford the civilian population and essential infrastructure much improved protection. But these systems, as advanced as they are, cannot hermetically seal the skies against the vast number of rockets and missiles in Hezbollah's arsenal.

Therefore from the outset of any future battle, Israel will have to unleash unprecedented force both from the air and on the ground. The IDF will have to launch a large-scale joint air and ground operation to inhibit Hezbollah's capacity to launch missiles and rockets, and take out Lebanese infrastructure. It will also aim to exact a heavy price from Hezbollah to deter it from initiating future hostilities. ■

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